

January 13, 2017
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Region 2 Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Bitterroot Conservation District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Paula Wetzsteon
Bitter Root Water Forum

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward riparian fencing and revegetation on the East Fork of the Bitterroot River, a tributary to the Bitterroot River. The project site is located on the Lazy J Cross Ranch, located near Sula in Ravalli County.

Please submit any comments by 11:59 PM on February 12, 2017 to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish & Wildlife Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michelle McGree", followed by a horizontal line.

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Habitat Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
East Fork Bitterroot River Riparian Fencing & Revegetation

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward riparian fencing and revegetation. Riparian fencing will be installed along 2,000 feet of the stream, nursery plants and shrub transplants will be used, and browse protectors will protect many plants. The fencing configuration will create a large buffer and restoration activities are meant to enhance natural recruitment and repair banks when necessary. Because riparian fencing falls under a categorical exclusion, this environmental assessment will focus on the revegetation portion of the project.

I. Location of Project:

This project will be conducted on the East Fork Bitterroot River, a tributary to the Bitterroot River, located on the Lazy J Cross Ranch near Sula, within Township 1N, Range 19W, Section 10 in Ravalli County (Figure 1).

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "protect, maintain, and restore native fish populations, their habitats, life cycles, and genetic diversity to ensure stewardship of native species." This project intends to improve habitat for Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout by reducing sediment and thermal pollution. A riparian corridor will be fenced and woody riparian vegetation will be increased along the riparian area to create a healthy riparian buffer that should shade the temperature impaired stream and improve conditions for fish populations.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to install 4,050 linear feet of riparian fencing to protect 2,000 feet of the East Fork Bitterroot River from browse (categorical exclusion) and plant vegetation to enhance and repair the riparian area while allowing for natural vegetative recruitment. The overall goal is to improve conditions for fish while also improving overall stream health. This project is expected to cost \$54,762. Of this

total, the FFIP would be contributing up to \$9,000 to complete the project.

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
MT Dept. of Environmental Quality		\$19,750
Bitterroot Trout Unlimited / Private Donor		\$6,075
Volunteers	\$8,230	
Landowner (live transplants)	\$5,550	
Total Match: \$39,555		

IV. Environmental Impact Review Checklist:

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment

Project Title: East Fork Bitterroot River Riparian Fencing & Revegetation

Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)

Description of Project: Riparian fencing will be installed along 2,000 feet of the stream (categorical exclusion), nursery plants and shrub transplants will be used, and browse protectors will protect many plants. Restoration activities are meant to enhance natural recruitment and repair banks when necessary.

A. POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture			X			X
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)			X			X
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality			X			X
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species			X			X
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species				X		
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B. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation				X		
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture

This project is expected to improve soil stability through reduced erosion. The riparian plantings, combined with the riparian fencing that will reduce browse, is intended to encourage root growth and hold banks together. Soil would be contained within the streambanks and would not erode into the stream. The East Fork of the Bitterroot River is listed as impaired by Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) for sediment and temperature.

3. Water quantity, quality, and distribution.

No changes in streamflow would occur in the East Fork Bitterroot River as a result of the proposed project. No work will be completed in-stream, and therefore should not affect turbidity. However, the project is intended to improve water quality in the East Fork Bitterroot River, which is listed as impaired by DEQ.

5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality

This project would improve vegetation cover, quantity, and quality by revegetation of the stream banks and riparian area. Vegetative communities would be actively created through planting and seeding, and natural vegetative recruitment would be encouraged. Species planted would be

native, with the goal of achieving a black cottonwood forest with a riparian shrub understory. Increased vegetative cover is intended to provide shade, with the goal of reducing the temperature in the East Fork Bitterroot River.

7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats.

This project would revegetate the stream banks and riparian area on the East Fork Bitterroot River on the Lazy J Cross Ranch. Approximately 2,000 feet of stream would be addressed in an area that is listed as impaired for temperature and sediment by DEQ. Long term, the project intends to provide additional shade and reduce erosion, which could provide cooler water for aquatic life as well as reduce fine sediment. As an area that contains Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout, which require cooler temperatures and areas without accumulations of fine sediment for spawning, the potential for habitat improvement is significant.

8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species

This project is intended to affect Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout, federally recognized and “Species of Concern” in Montana. The impacts are predicted to be positive, maintaining or increasing recruitment and survival of these species.

VI. Explanation of Impacts to the Human Environment

8. Cultural and historic resources.

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of the project, and any potential concerns will be addressed.

VII. Narrative Evaluation and Comment.

There are no anticipated cumulative effects.

VIII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative.

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, either the applicant would have to seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, or the affected area of East Fork Bitterroot River would retain its degraded riparian area and there would be no forward progress toward taking the stream off of the DEQ list of impaired waters.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore and revegetate the stream banks and riparian area of the East Fork Bitterroot River, with the goal of

reducing erosion and temperature.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

1. Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Bitterroot Conservation District

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None.

3. Is an EIS required?

No. We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

4. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: www.fwp.mt.gov.

5. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 11:59 PM on February 12, 2017.

6. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA.

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Contributor: Heather Barber, Bitter Root Water Forum

FIGURE 1: project location

